



Superman in Myth and Folklore

By Daniel Peretti. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017. 190 pp. Illus. £56.50 (hbk). ISBN 978-1-49681-458-6

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Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it's ... Daniel Peretti's intriguing exposition of why and how Superman crosses the Rubicon from commercial cartoon strip to a folkloric figure whose lived values dramatize American identities and moralities. While folklore's influence on popular culture has been well established and documented, here we are being invited to look through the other end of the telescope. Over seven chapters, Peretti, Assistant Professor of Folklore at Memorial University, explores how—through the folkloric genres of tattooing, festivals, jokes, and costume—the Superman mythos resonates with, motivates, and inspires a diverse range of Americans in their everyday lives.

With his manifold research interests in mythology and narrative art, material culture, and modern media, Peretti is well placed to attempt such a task. He begins by discussing who Superman actually is, no mean feat considering how the character has been portrayed through comic books, television, film, and the rest, and by multiple actors since his creation in 1938. However, Peretti is not interested in yet another media studies analysis, so much as in how ordinary people have adopted and appropriated Superman to evince their own hopes, fears, and dreams. Hence, his emphasis is upon expressions over origins of the Superman character, and upon creative agency, fluid and flexible cultural production and performance on the part of otherwise ordinary Americans. And that, guys, is folklore.

It is in this spirit that Chapter Two introduces us to Jodi, Jeff, and Kristina, three individuals for whom Superman's existential plight as an outsider-insider resonates with their own life self-narratives. Indeed, so powerful is Jodi's sense of affinity with Superman in this respect that she has even had the 'S' chevron tattooed between her breasts, despite by her own admission not really being a fan. Meanwhile, Jeff articulates Superman's quasi-religious qualities, a theme to be picked up again later on.

For Chapter Three we remain with the life-narratives case-study approach, while changing tack slightly to explore Superman's role in constructions of morality. Taking as his starting point Hans Vaihinger's philosophical notion of 'what if?', Peretti probes the ways in which Superman has implicitly and occasionally explicitly influenced his subjects' responses to moral dilemmas. Put simply, although (perhaps *because*) we know perfectly well that Superman is not really real, when the chips are down one can still ask oneself 'what would Superman do?'

If Chapter Three was somewhat abstract in premise, then Chapter Four effectively evokes the materiality of the annual Superman Celebration in Metropolis, Illinois, USA. Over a weekend, Peretti witnessed Superman appreciation in all its diverse manifestations, including costume, drama, and film. The vast majority of this material is, significantly for this discussion, generated and performed by the fans themselves, taking Superman and his story in directions probably never imagined by his creators. Peretti is also struck by the evident camaraderie: for just this one weekend each year, fans from all over the United States and beyond ritually step out of normal life in order to realize a different kind of community.

From in-depth engagement with individual case studies (and incidentally precluding any accusations of anecdotalism which might just have been lurking at the back of this reviewer's mind), Peretti now steps backwards to examine Superman jokes at the cultural level. The only slight problem he encounters here is that Superman is not really known for his sense of humour. Nonetheless, Peretti diligently identifies four Superman joke types and several cartoons to dissect. It is worth the effort, for an interesting elucidation of how, through knowing parody, Superman folklore facilitates the exploration of sensitive social and personal issues such as body image, moral perfection, and mental well-being.

Chapter Six returns one final time to the field, where we are introduced to Scott and Josh. Both men have found artistic, social, and even spiritual outlets through costuming: Scott visits children's hospitals dressed as Superman, and uses it to teach his own kids to be superheroes. Meanwhile Josh, a lapsed Catholic, points out that, unlike God, at least Superman actually

turns up when you are in a sticky spot. Along the way, and on a more practical note, we also learn about the difficulties of making a properly fitting cape and finding the perfect shade of bright red. Then to the final chapter, in which Peretti presents his concluding evaluation of the Superman mythos. At slightly dizzying speed we are whisked through Dundes and Honko, Barthes and Dorson, as if Peretti has suddenly remembered that he needs to talk to the academic readers too. For me, the contrast between this chapter and the rest of the book epitomizes the somewhat awkward admixture of academic theory and concrete experience that characterizes this book generally.

Where Peretti does deliver very well indeed is upon his promise of bottom-up fieldwork and real-life case studies, and here his ability sympathetically to enter into his subjects' moral and emotional worlds comes to the fore. The resulting account of Superman tattoos, festival, costuming, and the rest is also replete with his own responses to his material; one can sense his personal journey. Key points throughout are nicely reinforced with some well-selected and well-placed black-and-white images.

So is *Superman in Myth and Folklore*, like its subject, faster than a speeding bullet? Does it even fly? In this reviewer's opinion, the essential premise that Superman has become part and parcel of American folklore does indeed possess a certain exit velocity. That said, I was less convinced by Peretti's assertion that Superman is entirely unique amongst superheroes in this regard; if that really is the case, I had better put my Batmobile away right now.

Superman fans, together with students of the two-way relationship between folklore and popular culture, will all enjoy and learn from this original, accessibly written, and frankly rather fun book.

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Runes and Roman Letters in Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts. By Victoria Symons. *Ergänzungsbande zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 99. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2016. x + 226 pp. £100.00 (hbk). ISBN 978-3-11049-474-7

A tantalizing paragraph in the so-called *Liber Commonei*, a ninth-century manuscript from Wales, which now forms part of St Dunstan's Classbook (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Auct. F. 4. 32), recounts how one Nemnivus in a flash of inspiration invented a runic-looking alphabet, complete with values and letter-names, when a Saxon scholar berated him because the British lacked an alphabet (*rudimentum*). The alphabet which follows this narrative turns out to be a quasi (perhaps even parodic) runic alphabet, depending quite closely on Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon runic alphabets. In addition to its appearance in the *Liber Commonei*, the same alphabet (without the introductory narrative) occurs in some of the same alphabet lists (e.g. Oxford, St John's College MS 17) discussed in Chapter Five of this volume. There are several interesting points about this narrative. First, I suspect there are a number of embedded jokes, but for our purposes it is important to note that Nemnivus throws back into the face of the Saxon scholar an alphabet which is itself effectively runic. In turning the tables like this, the runic form is clearly being seen as something distinctively English. The other point is that this narrative does not figure in the volume being reviewed here.

Runes and Roman Letters in Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts is an interesting study of the use of runes. It sets out to 'provide a comprehensive commentary on Anglo-Saxon textual runes, and of the compositions in which they are embedded' (11). As is rightly pointed out, previous studies have tended to treat such texts either as literary constructs (with the runes as a marginal